

A Radical History of the World

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A Radical History of the World

Neil Faulkner

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Introduction

History is contested. How we understand the past affects how we think and act in the present. Partly because of this, history is a battleground of rival interpretations. All knowledge of the present – of its crises, wars, and revolutions – is necessarily historical. We can no more make sense of our own world without reference to the past than we could manufacture a computer without reference to the accumulated technical knowledge of many decades.

But elites with wealth and power to defend – and conservative historians who reflect the worldview of elites past and present – tend to promote a sanitised view of history. They emphasise continuity and tradition, obedience and conformity, nationalism and empire. They usually downplay the exploitation and violence of the rich, and often ignore the lives of the poor and their struggles for change. In doing so – in having a lopsided view of the past – they frequently miss the motor forces of history.

This version of history has become more dominant over the last 40 years. Past empires – like the Roman and the British – have been held up as models of civilisation by supporters of Western military intervention in today's world. Medieval Europe has been reinterpreted as an exemplar of the 'neoclassical' economics favoured by millionaire bankers. Great revolutions have been reinterpreted as mere coups or faction-fights by 'revisionists' keen to write social conflict out of history. Attempts to *explain* the past – so that we can *understand* the present, and act to *change* the future – have been rubbished by 'postmodern' theories that argue history has no structure, pattern, or meaning.

Sometimes these theories are dressed up as 'new research'. Historians research the archives to collect new data all the time. This may change some of our interpretations. It is rare, however, for new data to overturn an old paradigm wholesale. Scholars trying to build an academic career or advance a political theory sometimes claim too much for new data. Revisionist historians may be better informed, but none the wiser.

Much modern research, inserted into a postmodern framework, merely leaves us with disconnected fragments of information. History is left without pattern or trajectory. It becomes, as the automobile mogul Henry Ford once said, just ‘one damn thing after another’.

The basic job of the historian, on the other hand, is to divine the general amid the particular, the pattern amid the detail, the direction of travel amid the chaos of events, history’s arrows of development amid its cycles of reproduction. For, as the great German philosopher Georg Hegel taught us, the truth is the whole.

This is the tradition in which this book stands. It rejects the view of Henry Ford, with its implication that human beings are just flotsam and jetsam on the tide of events. This, incidentally, was also the view of Soviet dictator Joseph Stalin, where history was seen as a succession of predetermined ‘stages’ through which human society was bound to advance (and it was seen as ‘advance’, or ‘progress’).

This study takes a diametrically opposite view, arguing that history is continually created and recreated by conscious, collective human action. It argues that the struggles of the common people – slaves and serfs, handloom weavers and mine workers, women fighting oppression, black people fighting racism, colonised people fighting imperialism – these struggles, occasionally fusing into mass revolutionary upsurges, drive the historical process.

So this is an approach to history that emphasises agency, contingency, and the existence of alternatives; an approach that rejects the view that war and empire are inevitable, that there is no alternative to the market, and that greed, bullying, and violence are universal. Quite the reverse, argued the revolutionary thinker and activist Karl Marx, who wrote in a political pamphlet published in 1852: ‘Men [and women] make their own history, but not of their own free will, and not under circumstances of their own choosing.’

In other words, the course of history is not predetermined; its outcome is not inevitable; it can go in different directions according to what human beings do.

This book began life as a series of online articles on a left-wing website between 2010 and 2012. Six years on, the text is being published in a much expanded form in this book. I have done this for three reasons. First, because I had become aware of major omissions

and wanted to plug the gaps. Second, because I had received much constructive critical comment and wanted to act on this and make appropriate amendments. Third, because major changes in global politics over the last six years seemed to demand an expanded and updated final chapter dealing with the world crisis.

A Radical History of the World can be read in different ways. It can be read cover-to-cover as a single study, or it can be treated as a collection of short analytical essays and dipped into for information and ideas about specific events – an approach facilitated by the fact that it retains the structure of the web series, being divided into both chapters and sections. Partly with this in mind, material is occasionally repeated where I felt it might be helpful to readers. I have also sometimes used modern place-names – like Iraq and Pakistan – in reference to earlier periods, believing it might help readers to place events geographically. By the same token, the timeline at the back is there to help readers get their chronological bearings. Scattered through the narrative are a handful of theoretical ‘excursuses’, where I step out of the frame, as it were, to set out some general ideas about the historical process as a whole; these are clearly marked as such.

Because this is a work of extreme compression – a one-volume world history: the ultimate grand narrative – I have dispensed with the conventional academic apparatus of references and notes. Instead, there is an extended discussion of sources and an annotated bibliography at the back so that readers can check up on my sources and find guidance on further reading.

A common criticism of the web version was that I had neglected certain places and periods; that the text suffered in particular from ‘Euro-centrism’, even ‘Anglo-centrism’. This criticism was justified. I have done my best to correct it. There are, for example, fresh sections on Spanish and Latin American history. But I cannot claim that this is a truly ‘global history’. The reason is simple and obvious: I am a British-based archaeologist and historian with uneven expertise. Like all generalists, I can never wholly escape the constraints of my training, experience, and reading. I must therefore seek the indulgence and forbearance of readers who are neither British nor European.

Even over the ground I have covered, I suspect I leave a trail of errors and misunderstandings – inviting denunciation by sundry cohorts of specialists. This, too, is the inevitable fate of the generalist. There is only one defence. Would correcting the errors and misun-

derstandings invalidate the main arguments? If so, the project fails. If not – if the Marxist approach has provided a convincing explanation of the main events and developments of human history *irrespective* of misconstrued details – then the project succeeds.

Hopefully, though, it will achieve something more. For it is first and foremost a book for activists, and it will have served its purpose in so far as it persuades people that, since humans make their own history, the future is open and will be determined by what each of us does.

I am not, as one reviewer suggested I should be, ‘a disinterested historian’. Because I share with Marx the view that ‘the history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggles’, I share with him also the view that whereas ‘the philosophers have only interpreted the world, the point is to change it’.

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Among the reviewers of the original work, a number made constructive criticisms which I have acted upon in this new text. They include: Keith Flett, John Green, Sean Ledwith, Michael Seltzer, and Andrew Stone. I am grateful to them for taking the book seriously and suggesting ways of improving it. I must also make special mention of my friend and colleague Nadia Durrani, who rewrote the whole of the first section on human evolution, where I was woefully out of date.

1

Hunters and Farmers

c. 7 million–3000 BP



The White Lady of Aouanrhet. Rock painting, Tassili, Central Sahara, c. 3000 BC. She appears to be a goddess or priestess of fertility. Note the field and shower of grain above her head.

The Agricultural Revolution of the Neolithic (or New Stone Age) transformed the whole of human social experience. Only the Industrial Revolution has had a comparable impact.

Our story begins with a rapid survey of a vast span of time from about seven million years ago to about 5,000 years ago. During this period, as a product of biological, environmental, cultural, and social evolution, a succession of radical transformations took place. First, around 7–6 million years ago, in Chad or Kenya, we have the appearance of the first potential hominins, that is, creatures on our evolutionary tree after our split from the ancestors of the chimpanzees.

Second, around 3.3 million years ago, in Kenya, we have the first evidence of tool-making, representing a fundamental change in hominin behaviour. This and subsequent early technologies (such as the more famous Oldowan tools) are very basic. But then, around 1.9 million years ago, in East and South Africa, certain hominins evolved into creatures with larger brains, greater capacity for tool-making, and higher levels of social organisation and environmental adaptability. This creature had a fairly modern body-shape and is known as *Homo ergaster* ('Working Human'). This species was very similar to *Homo erectus* ('Upright Human'), a fossil type not really known in Africa, but widely distributed across Asia.

Third, after *c.* 350,000 years ago, we have the first evidence for ourselves: *Homo sapiens* ('Thinking Human'). These, our direct ancestors, seem to have originated in Morocco. The early fossils, however, display a mix of archaic and modern characteristics, and our species only became fully anatomically (and presumably cerebrally) modern by about 120,000 years ago.

Fourth, about 10,000 years ago, under the impact of climate change and food shortages, some communities made the transition from hunting and gathering to farming.

Fifth, about 6,000 years ago, new techniques of land reclamation and intensive farming allowed some communities in favoured locations to increase their output substantially by moving from hoe-based cultivation to plough-based agriculture.

The Hominin Transformations

We have evidence for creatures considered to be hominins reaching back to seven million years BP (before the present; the usual term when discussing hominin evolution). On the human tree roll-call the earliest is *Sabelanthropus tchadensis*, found in Chad (7–6 BP), whose status as a hominin is rather insecure, but it may have partially

walked on two feet (bipedalism being one of the main characteristics of hominins). Then comes *Orrorin tugenensis* from Kenya (6.2–5.6 BP), who may also hold the title of earliest bipedal hominin.

These two creatures (and there were probably many more: we just have not found them) were followed by other hominins such as *Ardipithecus ramidus* (4.5–4.3 BP) from Ethiopia and *Kenyanthropus platyops* from Kenya (3.5–3.3 BP).

But perhaps the best-known early hominin was the australopithecine, who emerged around 4.2 BP in East Africa. One of these, *Australopithecus afarensis* ('Southern Ape of Afar'), roamed throughout parts of East Africa (including Laetoli, where a small family left footsteps in the mud) around 3.7–3 million BP. We have found the fragmented remains of several hundred such creatures, and they reveal evidence for both a bipedal and a tree-based (arboreal) lifestyle. The best-known specimen of *Australopithecus afarensis* is the 40 per cent complete skeleton of 'Lucy' found in 1974 (though she may have been male).

Lucy stood just 1.1 m tall, weighed around 29 kg, and was probably about 20 years old when she died. With short legs, long arms, and a small brain case, Lucy would have looked rather like a modern chimpanzee. But there was a crucial difference: like all (certain) hominins, she was able to walk upright (though she could also climb and would have spent some of her time in trees). The shape of her pelvis and legs, and the knee joint of another member of the species found a short distance away, proved this beyond reasonable doubt.

Lucy was probably one of a small foraging group that moved around gathering fruit, nuts, seeds, eggs, and other foodstuffs. As climate change reduced the forests and created savannah, natural selection had favoured a species able to range over greater distances in search of food. But Lucy's bipedalism had revolutionary implications. It freed the hands and arms for tool-making and other forms of labour. This in turn encouraged natural selection in favour of larger brain capacity. A powerful dynamic of evolutionary change was set in motion: hand and brain, labour and intellect, skill and thought began an explosive interaction – one which culminated in modern humans.

We do not know whether Lucy made tools. None were found in association with her remains. But very early and very crude stone tools have recently been discovered dating to 3.3 million BP in Kenya – and may be associated with other forms of local australopithecines.

And certainly, by 2.5 million BP, *Homo habilis* ('Handy Human') – Lucy's potential descendant – certainly did. Choppers made from crudely chipped pebbles represent the archaeological imprint of a new family of species defined by tool-making behaviour: the genus *Homo* ('Human'). Tools embody conceptual thought, forward planning, and manual dexterity. They reveal the use of intellect and skill to modify nature in order to exploit its resources more efficiently.

The genus *Homo*, like the australopithecines before them, evolved in Africa, and for about 1.5 million BP that is where they largely remained. After around 1.8 million BP, however, we start finding evidence for *Homo erectus* in the Far East (China, Java, Indonesia) and also in Georgia near the Black Sea (though some define this creature as *Homo georgicus*).

Homo erectus seems to have been very closely related to an African form, *Homo ergaster*, an upright creature who emerged around 1.9 BP and is known from East and South Africa. *Homo ergaster* would have looked much like us in terms of body form, but she had a smaller brain. Her close relative, *Homo erectus*, persisted in parts of the Far East down the millennia, with the latest examples possibly dating to as recently as 30,000 years ago.

Meantime, back in Europe and Western Asia, other hominin forms were appearing, such as *Homo antecessor* and *Homo heidelbergensis*. The latter was probably the last common ancestor of the Neanderthals in Europe and modern humans in Africa.

The Ice Age epoch which began 2.5 million years ago had a great impact on human evolution. Ice Age climate is dynamic, shifting between cold glacials and relatively warm interglacials. We are currently in an interglacial, but 20,000 years ago much of Northern Europe and North America was in the middle of a glacial and covered by ice-sheets up to 4 km thick, with winters lasting nine months, and temperatures below -20°C for weeks on end.

The early hominins were not adapted to the cold, so they migrated north in warm periods and moved south again when the glaciers advanced. They first arrived in Britain, for example, at least 800,000 years ago, but then retreated and returned at least eight times. Britain was probably occupied for only about 20 per cent of its Old Stone Age (c. 800,000–10,000 years ago).

Homo antecessor ('Pioneer Human') – who was probably the first human in Britain, shortly followed by the closely related *Homo*

heidelbergensis ('Heidelberger Human') – seems to have inhabited coastal or estuarine regions, where animal resources were rich and varied. The standard tool was either an 'Acheulian' handaxe – essentially a chopper – or a 'Clactonian' flake – a cutter. These general-purpose tools were mass-produced as needed. Excavations at Boxgrove in England recovered 300 handaxes and much associated flint-knapping debris dating to around 500,000 years ago. They had been used to butcher horse, deer, and rhinoceros on what was then a savannah-like coastal plain.

During the last glaciation, however, there was no wholesale retreat. *Homo neanderthalensis* was a cold-adapted hominin that we think evolved out of *Homo heidelbergensis* in Europe and Western Asia about 350,000 years ago. Neanderthal adaptation was a matter of both biological evolution and new technology. With large heads, big noses, prominent brows, low foreheads, little chin development, and short, squat, powerfully built bodies, the Neanderthal was designed to survive winters with average temperatures as low as -10°C . But culture was more important, and this was linked to brain power.

Hominin brains had been getting bigger. Selection for this characteristic was a serious matter. Brain tissue is more expensive than other kinds: the brain accounts for only about 2 per cent of our body weight but no less than 20 per cent of food-energy consumption. It is also high-risk. Humans are adapted for walking upright, which requires a narrow pelvis, yet have a large brain-case, which imposes a strain on the woman's pelvis in childbirth; the result is slow, painful, and sometimes dangerous birth trauma. But the advantages are considerable. Large brains enable modern humans to create and sustain complex social relationships with, typically, about 150 others. Humans are not just social animals, but social animals to an extreme degree, with brains especially enlarged and sophisticated for this purpose.

Sociability confers enormous evolutionary benefits. Hominin hunter-gatherer bands were probably very small – perhaps 30 or 40 people. But they would have had links with other groups, perhaps half a dozen of similar size, with whom they shared mates, resources, labour, information, and ideas. Sociability, cooperation, and culture are closely related, and achieving them requires high levels of intelligence: in biological terms, brain tissue.